



**The City of
Thousand Oaks,
California,
ENGAGES WITH
ITS CITIZENS**

By Brent Sakaida

The City of Thousand Oaks, California, designed its “Your City, Your Priorities” project to build on its fiscal sustainability study. Its goals were to understand how residents prioritize city projects and services and to educate the public on the budget process. This was the city’s first large-scale citizen engagement initiative, in conjunction with the budget process, outside of City Council meetings. The foundation of “Your City, Your Priorities” included research-based brand development and outreach planning, identification and implementation of a budget simulation software tool, and development of audience-specific communication strategies.

An informed and engaged community is the key to resident satisfaction. Therefore, as a top priority, the city challenges itself to weave greater engagement strategies into citywide processes. It conducts a biannual Community Attitude Survey to gauge community sentiment in several key areas, including engagement and communication. The city also employs strategies to connect with stakeholders, including the use of social media, an electronic newsletter, and online surveys.

The “Your City, Your Priorities” project used a wide range of tools amplify outreach, including:

- **Informing.** The city developed a dedicated web page with accessible budget information and a link to the customized budget-simulation survey tool, a homepage news features on the city website, press releases, print and online advertising, and a video public service announcement.
- **Engaging.** Residents participated in the budget survey using an online tool. The city posted weekly on several social media channels and hosted a series of interactive pop-up community events.
- **Cultivating Budget Champions.** The city distributed print and electronic information to community partners for redistribution to stakeholders and called for participation at key community meetings. A budget-specific e-newsletter was also distributed to share information.

GETTING UNDERWAY

City staff first discussed the idea of community engagement with the city council in January 2016, when a fiscal sustainability study was presented to the council. At an annual goal-setting meeting in May 2016, the council directed staff to develop a public outreach program that would ascertain the community’s opinions and recommendations on citywide service priorities and, at the same time, teach residents about the city’s budget process. The project was expected to help staff develop the budget and verify the extent to which residents’ opinions aligned with the results of the city’s biennial resident survey, first conducted in 2013.

Since the city was embarking on this type of program for the first time, staff decided to work with a knowledgeable consultant that had experience with public outreach and community engagement. The initial idea was to lay a solid foundation for this process that would allow city staff to continue with citizen engagement during future budget cycles.

The first step of the project involved coming up with a brand, including a logo and catch phrase, followed by several planning meetings to find an innovative way to provide public outreach. After coming up with “Your City, Your Priorities” as the project

catch phrase, the core engagement team decided to hold pop-up events throughout the city in order to capture a wide variety of resident opinions, since they are less formal and involve staff going out into the community, as opposed to asking the community to come to a government office.

Pop-ups are events or locations where city staff sets up areas for residents to meet with staff and discuss their priorities, play games to learn more about the city’s budget, and receive informational materials and handouts about the budget. Staff held four events, at the farmer’s market, a local mall, the city’s Arbor Earth Day celebration, and a Coffee with the Chiefs event where the city’s police and fire chiefs spoke with residents about their questions and concerns.

Staff worked with the city's Television/Media Department to prepare a public service announcement, which was attached to social media and advertisements, to explain the process. (The video can be viewed at gfoa.org/ThousandOaksBudgetToolPSA.) Staff also promoted the program through a series of media outlets, including social media (e.g., Facebook, NextDoor, Twitter, and LinkedIn,) radio and newspaper ads, inserts in utility bills, posters and handouts at city and other partner facilities (e.g., city libraries, teen and senior centers, and the Chamber of Commerce), and the city's website to direct residents to an online budget simulation tool and a survey asking for input about city services.

The online budget simulation tool was developed to make it easy for participants to "balance the budget" using sliders that either added or subtracted money from a variety of city-provided services. The tool included comment boxes that residents could use to explain their budget adjustment or comment on services. The goal was to obtain more than 500 responses.

GETTING RESULTS

The community engagement process achieved impressive results. Over a three-month period, more than 4,000 people visited the city's budget educational web page, 1,200 people learned about the budget and/or had the opportunity to provide feedback at a pop-up workshop, and 600 residents

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shared their priorities and comments via the 10-minute online budget simulation survey. The survey asked about budget allocations for police services, transit operations, library services, open space, and teen and senior citizens, along with open-ended questions about streets and roads, traffic congestion, cultural affairs, and economic development.

The public favored the following budget priorities:

- Increase funding for police services by 3 to 4 percent.
- Increase funding for open space by 3 to 4 percent.

Tools and Resources

The City of Thousand Oaks employed a number of tools and strategies with the "Your City, Your Priorities" campaign.

1. Community Engagement Strategy. The city created a community engagement strategy document as the foundation of its community outreach initiative. This document laid out goals for outreach, ways to measure engagement results, and final objectives. The city also identified ways to implement a community engagement cycle, a process that informs the community, engages residents, and cultivates well-informed "budget-engagement champions."

2. Budget Survey Tool. The city created an online survey and live game that presented citizen users with budget scenarios and asked for their input on decisions. The game allowed citizens to give general feedback and to see examples of the specific budget decisions the city is faced with. An educational video helped citizens understand the process.

3. Measuring Engagement Results. The city produced infographics to reflect engagement numbers for both in-person community engagement events and responses to online survey initiatives. Visuals reflecting these responses were included in a summary report to the city council; the report included a detailed breakdown from engagement events, an analysis of citizen feedback, and recommended steps for the city to take next.

About Thousand Oaks

The City of Thousand Oaks is the second largest city in Ventura County, California. It is part of Greater Los Angeles and has a population of more than 130,000. In 2018, the city received the GFOA Award for Excellence for exemplary use of GFOA's Best Practice on Public Participation in Planning, Budgeting, and Performance Management.

The Best Practice: *Public Engagement in the Budget Process*

Good public participation practices can help governments become more accountable and responsive to their communities while also improving the public's perception of governmental performance and the value the public receives from their government. Transparency is a core value of governmental budgeting. Developing a transparent budget process will improve the government's credibility and trust within the community.

Traditionally, public participation meant voting, running for office, being involved in political campaigns, attending public hearings, and keeping informed on important issues of the day by reading government reports or the local newspaper. At an increased level of involvement, the public, acting as individuals and in groups, advocated specific government policies by attending or sponsoring public meetings, lobbying government officials, or bringing media attention to policy issues. Governments have used new forms of public involvement — surveys, focus groups, neighborhood councils, social media, and citizen relationship management systems, among others — to help governments make decisions about service levels and preferences, community priorities, and organizational performance.

In its *Public Engagement in the Budget Process* best practice (available at gfoa.org), GFOA recommends ways to create an effective and well-implemented public engagement budget processes, enabling the public to work with their government to help make beneficial budget decisions.

Start by Establishing a Tangible Purpose. The crucial first step for conducting a public participation process is articulating its purpose (e.g., improving performance, adjusting service levels, differentiating among expectations, and understanding priorities).

Encourage People to Engage. The best way to assure a broad perspective is to collect information in a variety of ways and from a variety of sources. To get the public involved in the process, start early enough that public input meaningfully influences decisions. Provide information to the public in a format that they can understand, via newsletters, public notices in community media, public hearings, public reports, websites and dashboards, education, etc.

Provide the Engagement Medium. To make conversations more productive, make sure they're real, fact-based conversations that residents enjoy.

Provide Opportunities for Future Engagement. Systematically collect, maintain, monitor, and analyze information gained from public involvement activities, and maintain contact information on individuals and groups that wish to be kept informed. Use multiple communication mechanisms to ensure that those who are involved or interested in the process are notified of opportunities for additional feedback and of decisions made based on the public involvement process. Most importantly, explain how public involvement has made a difference in plans, budgets, and performance, and gather public feedback on how successful the process has been through the public's eyes.

- Increase funding for library services by 2 to 3 percent.
- Maintain funding for transit operations at current levels.
- Decrease funding for the community center but 0.5 to 1 percent.
- Decrease funding for the teen center by 1 to 2 percent.
- Prioritize ways to address traffic congestion through traffic light

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synchronization and other traffic light improvements.

Even if they had complaints residents were generally happy to be asked to share their opinions.

CONCLUSIONS

The City of Thousand Oak's primary reason for the undertaking of its community engagement project was

Project Overview

Goals

1. To inform local stakeholders about the city's key spending areas and build a knowledgeable community that's prepared to engage with budget planning during the preparation of the city's two-year budget.
2. To provide all residents with the opportunity to share their input on the city's budget priorities.
3. To work with outside agencies, share the city's budget messages, and promote engagement and connectivity.
4. To create a flexible engagement toolkit for use with future projects.

Strategies

- Develop a brand that aligns with city's guidelines and ensure consistency among promotional materials.
- Create feedback tools by developing interactive online and live systems to collect community input.
- Create a dedicated and dynamic webpage that will serve as an online information resource hub for budget-related items.
- Host several interactive pop-up events to engage and inform the public face to face.

- Conduct robust community outreach through all social media channels, newsletters, and presentations at public meetings.
- Expand outreach and make better use of it through internal and community partners.
- Produce paid print and radio advertising for strategic placement in publications with high readership.
- Spearhead extensive media relations for press coverage and promotion.

Objectives

- Budget between February 1 and May 7, 2017: \$50,000
- Consultant support: 25 percent logo design, communications planning support, pop-up space and interactive demonstration planning.
- Collect responses from at least 500 online budget survey participants.
- City team to engage face-to-face with at least 1,000 residents and stakeholders.
- Consultant to engage with least 5,000 visits to the budget information webpage.
- Develop a master engagement template/toolkit.

to educate residents and other city stakeholders about the fiscal sustainability of city funds and about the budget process, as well as obtaining their comments and recommendations about city services. The campaign met most of its objectives and provided valuable insights into how the city can successfully build sustainable and manageable community engagement strategies. ■

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